

THE COLUMBIA STATE (SC)

2 February 1983

CIA Report Premature On Shooting Of Pope

THE President should be skeptical of the recent Central Intelligence Agency assessment of the intricate plot to kill Pope John Paul II in 1981. An investigation by Italian authorities is not yet complete, and more evidence is coming in.

What the CIA analysis says precisely is not known since such documents are not published for the public's reading. Nevertheless, well-placed sources have leaked the substance of the report to the press.

The CIA believes the Bulgarians knew in advance of the attempt to murder the pope but that neither the Bulgarians nor the Soviet Union instigated the attack.

Strong circumstantial evidence is being developed by Italian prosecutors that may lead to the Bulgarian connection, and inferentially to the Soviets' KGB. The Bulgarian security apparatus is an extension of the KGB, and intelligence authorities agree that nothing would go on that Moscow didn't approve.

"Moscow" in this case is Soviet Premier Yuri Andropov. He was, at the time of the shooting in St. Peter's Square, the head of the KGB. He could have been ultimately responsible for the attack.

The implications for East-West and U.S.-U.S.S.R. relations if that link could be established are mind-boggling. The possibility of the link should make any summit meeting between Mr. Reagan and Mr. Andropov out of the question at this time.

In that regard, the CIA's leaked report can be viewed suspiciously as an instrument of diplomacy. Is it a sign that the United States doesn't want to blame the Soviets so there will be no new stress on the relationship between the two superpowers?

That would jibe with government-wide policy not to agitate the assassination story because that could work for the Soviets, who already claim the assassination is a CIA plot.

We agree that American officials do well to keep their mouths shut until more definite evidence is put on the record by the Italian investigators and prosecutors. Let the investigation unfold to a conclusive end.

The pope was wounded by a Turkish terrorist, Mehmet Ali Agca, who has been tried and sentenced to life. In exchange for a sentence reduction, Agca appears to be singing like a canary to the prosecutors.

Agca says he was sprung from a Turkish prison, where he was doing time for killing a Turkish newspaper editor, by a Turkish terrorist named Oral Celik. Agca then spent nearly three months in Bulgaria, living extremely well. It is said that at this time Agca was paid the first advance on a \$750,000 contract to shoot the pope.

The bagman reportedly was Musar Ceder Celebi, a guerrilla chief connected to the Bulgarians. He was found in West Germany earlier this month and has been extradited to Italy for interrogation.

Agca says he had the names of three Bulgarians to contact in Rome. One, Sergei Antonov, a Bulgarian airline employee, has been arrested by Italian authorities. The other two, both Bulgarian diplomats, fled the country before they could be located. Agca claims that, on the day of the shooting, Antonov and one of the other Bulgarians drove to St. Peter's Square with him.

The pistol Agca used was given to him, he says, by another Turk, Omar Bagci, who has been caught in Switzerland and returned to Italy for questioning.

The CIA assessment is certainly premature and appears to serve some other purpose than to get at the truth of the Soviet-Bulgarian connection, if any, with the assassination of the pope.